

Rethinking Utopia

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Abstract

In her short story 'The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas', Ursula Le Guin manipulates her use of language to reveal the necessary horrors that lie beneath a utopia. She initially invites you into a beautiful festival exploding with colour and life, but soon exposes the child locked in the basement whose suffering is required for the city to function. She poses the ultimate question: if your society was built on the absolute misery of someone else, would you walk away from it? Or would you simply continue to live and ignore it?

In 'The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas' ('Omelas'), Ursula Le Guin manipulates language and structure to present what initially appears to be a brilliant utopia only to reveal its hidden horrors. She begins by describing a blissful and heavenly city, but a speculative narrative voice then discloses what is lying behind the utopian front of Omelas. Le Guin is in fact drawing upon many established philosophical wonderings to encourage readers to rethink the way they might be living.

The story opens with a vivid and illustrative picture of a celebratory parade in a seaside city, which firmly sets the idea of a utopia in the mind of the reader. It is written almost like a poem with its highly descriptive quality and use of traditional literary devices such as alliteration, as seen in 'set the swallows soaring' and 'past great parks and public buildings, processions moved'.¹ As Sarah Wyman writes, 'The breathless, long lines of the first paragraph mimic the festival parade the words describe'.² Le Guin aims to leave the reader feeling 'joyous', as the narrator later refers to it, and perhaps overly so, as it later allows her to undermine this happiness. Since she uses such shining language in her opening, such as 'sparkled', 'shimmering' and 'sweetness', this increases the effect of the harsher, colder language she chooses when referring to the child just by contrast. Like Lee Khanna writes, 'Omelas' is built on binary oppositions. Utopian citizens parade, in unity and joy, into their beautiful city; dissenting citizens walk alone and sorrowfully away from it'.³ By beginning with such a lengthy description

¹ Ursula K Le Guin, 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' (1976) in Ann Charters (ed), *The Story and its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction* (Bedford / St Martins, 6th ed, 2003) 902.

² Sarah Wyman 'Reading Through Fictions in Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"' (2012) 25 ANQ 229.

³ Lee Cullen Khanna, 'Beyond Omelas: Utopia and Gender' (1991) 2 *Utopian Studies* 48.

of an idyllic setting, Le Guin sets up the utopia of which she later exposes the flaws.

The narrator then emerges, revealing a very speculative voice that encourages the reader to add their thoughts to the city's construction so that they feel part of it. The use of such a unique form of narration seems unusual and perhaps jarring at first, but it eventually becomes clear that there are two advantages to Le Guin's choice. Firstly, the narrator asks for the reader's thoughts about the city and how it might run, as demonstrated in phrases such as, 'I fear that Omelas strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate'.⁴ By involving the reader in such construction, the narrator is encouraging them to become a part of Omelas, a citizen of this utopia. Secondly, the hypothetical nature of the narrator's description allows almost anyone to relate to this city and impose their own way of life onto it. Nothing is concrete, and the story is littered with phrases such as, 'I do not know', 'I suspect' and 'I think', allowing the reader to be guided by the narrator's suggestions but ultimately shape the city into the form with which they are most familiar. As Linda Simon writes, 'The physical attributes of the community are, in any case, not significant. The point of invention is to assure readers that they would find happiness as citizens of Omelas'.⁵ It also allows Le Guin's commentary and eventual message to reach as many people as possible. This story is not aimed at a specific audience; she intends for it to resonate with the majority of her readers.

In fact, 'Omelas' deals with some very hard-hitting concepts for such a short story, which might be because Le Guin is expanding upon established ideas and theories. The story is often published with the subtitle 'Variations on a theme by William James', which is Le Guin's acknowledgement of what sparked the inspiration for 'Omelas' in the first place. In his essay, James writes of 'millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torment'.⁶ Le Guin's interpretation of this 'lost soul' comes to life as the child in the basement, and as Bruce E. Brandt's writes, it 'is more movingly portrayed as a child, [and] the reader is asked to ponder at some length the things that might be part of a utopian life'.⁷ Additionally, the child is tied to the idea of a scapegoat, which has its origins in the Bible. As Paula Simons writes, 'In Biblical times, the scapegoat was a real goat, an animal sacrifice meant to carry away the sins of the people'.⁸ As Le Guin alludes to this idea by limiting

⁴ Le Guin, above n 1, 903.

⁵ Linda Simon, 'William James's Lost Souls in Ursula Le Guin's Utopia' (2004) 28 *Philosophy and Literature* 92.

⁶ William James, 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' (1891) *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy* 188.

⁷ Bruce E Brandt, 'Two Additional Antecedents for Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"' (2003) 16 *ANQ* 52.

⁸ Paula Simons, 'We still need our scapegoats, it seems' (2000) 23 *Edmonton Journal*.

the suffering to one child, she is able to encourage the idea of the scapegoat in her readers' minds and capitalise on the rich history surrounding it. By implying these ideas in her story, Le Guin tackles complicated concepts that already exist and positions her readers to think about them in a new, potentially more convincing way.

One of the big questions that come out of 'Omelas' is whether all stories need to have a message or moral. After all, Le Guin has constructed the story so as to entice her readers with the idea of utopia, therefore maximising the impact of the reveal that the city is built upon this one child's suffering. Kenneth Roemer writes that 'as the narrator leaves the descriptive mode and moves to commentary, we discover that the questions are not rhetorical. They pose real ethical, linguistic, and perceptual problems involved in describing and conceptualizing utopia during the last 20th century'.⁹ Le Guin has taken her talent as a creative writer and discovered how to use it to advance a more political and ethical message that might initially seem out of place in a fictional universe. This issue is something that I always think about whenever I sit down to write a story, as I have noticed that my writing is much more focused and clearer when I have a specific message or goal in mind. Does the writer have an obligation to make their story worth reading in this way? Arguably, it makes Le Guin's story more 'literary' and less 'popular' in terms of fiction, as it has philosophical value and not just entertainment value. Personally, I have never tackled something as big as Le Guin achieves here, and it is definitely enlightening to see how she has manipulated normal literary conventions to best shape her message. Fictional writing does not always have to be a pursuit of character exploration or a simple three-arc plot — Le Guin demonstrates that it is also possible to pursue a narrative with an agenda.

The question remains of whether the reader would walk away from Omelas or not, but perhaps Le Guin did not intend for there to be a straightforward, morally-sound answer. As Roemer writes, 'Each reader will walk away from "Omelas" with different interpretations of the final phase, the child, and the glorious procession'.¹⁰ One common interpretation views this story as 'an allegory of Western hegemony',¹¹ arguing that its ideas reflect how much of the success and wealth of more affluent, capitalist nations relies on the existence of poorer, third-world countries. As David Brooks writes, 'many of us live in societies whose prosperity depends on some faraway child in the basement'.¹² He continues to describe the 'inner numbing' that this story creates in its readers — as they notice the similarities between Omelas and their own city, they realise that they have

⁹ Kenneth M Roemer, 'The Talking Porcupine Liberates Utopia: Le Guin's "Omelas" as Pretext to the Dance' (19912 *Utopian Studies* 8.

¹⁰ Ibid 12.

¹¹ Jerre Collins, 'Leaving Omelas: Questions of Faith and Understanding' (199027 *Studies in Short Fiction* 530.

¹² David Brooks, 'The child in the basement' *International New York Times* (New York, 12 January 2015) A27.

already faced this decision and not walked away. However, walking away is not necessarily the 'correct' response to this story. Wyman writes, "To withdraw, then, from this fellowship would be comparable to betraying the social contract and abdicating responsibility for the child's lot".¹³ It seems as though the reader has found themselves caught in a catch-22 — if they feel they would remain, they are condoning the child's suffering, but if they leave, they have simply removed themselves from the situation and have actually not done anything to help the city's social problems. Barbara Bennett suggests that it is actually possible to 'walk away figuratively, rather than literally'.¹⁴ Writing from an ecofeminist perspective, she lists ways that readers can achieve this by helping reshape their society rather than just abandoning it, such as 'recycling, carpooling [and] reducing the amount of goods they buy'.¹⁵ It is likely Le Guin is aware that there may not be an answer as to whether we are supposed to walk away from Omelas — but it is important to think about how we might change our behaviour or mindset all the same.

Ultimately, "Omelas" encourages its readers to face the harsh reality lying behind the idea of a utopia through an initial lull into believing the beautiful picture but an eventual challenge as to how they might behave in such a society. Le Guin achieves this through descriptive, poetic language shifting into a more hypothetical, speculative form of narration. Essentially, we begin reading a beautiful story but leave rethinking exactly how our world is run.

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¹³ Wyman, above n 2, 228.

¹⁴ Barbara Bennett, "Through Ecofeminist Eyes: Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"" (2005) 94 *English Journal* 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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